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ABSTRACT

This is a study investigating the hypothesis that group interaction facilitates the overt expression of negative and stereotypic attitudes. Responding to a videotaped interview of a Southern boy, Northern subjects in pairs tended to make a greater percentage of derogatory comments about this "outgroup" member than did Northern subjects who were alone. (Author)

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1. Title of paper

Evaluation of an outgroup member by individuals and groups.

2. Problem

There is work in social psychology which suggests that prejudice and ethnocentrism can gain heightened expression in group settings. Material by LeBon (1895) and Zimbardo (1969) suggests that as a result of deindividuation and anonymity people in crowds can become more aggressive toward outsiders. Zajonc' (1965) work on social facilitation and Moscovici and Zavalloni's (1969) work on group polarization both suggest that if particular individuals are predisposed to be hostile to outsiders their hostility is likely to be greater in a group setting. An historical analysis of the decision making processes in small government committees by Irving Janis (1972) also discusses group derrogation of outsiders. Janis described fiascos that occurred as a result of inadequate decision making procedures. One prominent characteristic of this "groupthink" phenomenon is the reliance on stereotypes of the enemy or outgroup to bolster ingroup morale. Although a government decision making committee hardly seems comparable to a crowd, the characteristics of irrationality, over confidence, and discrimination appear to be common to both. Any group is subject to these and other processes noted above which produce heightened hostility towards outsiders.

The present experiment sets out to test whether group

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interaction per se can facilitate outgroup discrimination. Reducing the group to its most basic form, the leaderless dyad, and placing the subjects in a situation where they were simply asked to evaluate a member of an outgroup, it was hypothesized that groups would be more likely to make disparaging remarks during the evaluation process than would individuals.

3. Subjects

Twenty-eight high school students aged 16-18 served as subjects in the experiment. They were all white residents of a New England town, and none of them had ever lived in the South. Eighteen students were telephoned and on a random basis, eight were asked to come alone (individual condition) and ten were asked to bring a friend along (group condition).

4. Procedure

When the subject(s) arrived, they were told that the purpose of the experiment was to study how people form impressions and evaluate someone they don't know. The experimenter explained that a short videotape of a 17 year old boy would be shown, and that afterwards they would indicate their impressions of the boy on a questionnaire. The experimenter pointed out the necessity of having a stimulus person who was unfamiliar to the subjects. Therefore, instead of taping a local student, she explained, she had arranged through a colleague of a professor to obtain a videotape from Duke University in North Carolina. The tape was allegedly made for a course at Duke on interviewing

techniques. The interview with the boy, who was actually from North Carolina, had been scripted for the experiment. In answering the questions, the boy spoke in a strong Southern accent and, in passing, made many references to the South and things Southern. He also showed an active lack of interest in the North. However, nowhere in the interview was there any mention of racial issues or political beliefs.

After watching the videotape, each subject or pair of subjects was handed a questionnaire which consisted of twenty-four antonym pairs, each on a nine-point scale (e.g., interesting-dull; good looking-ugly; likable-not likable; liberal-conservative). In the individual condition each subject was asked to "think out loud" as he or she filled out the questionnaire, and in the group condition the pair was asked to discuss each item and then decide on a joint rating. Both individual subjects and those in pairs understood that their comments were being taped so that the experimenter could analyze the bases for their impressions. Subjects in both conditions were relaxed with this procedure. Before being debriefed, subjects were given a brief questionnaire concerning any pre-existing biases towards Southerners.

5. Results

Of the twenty-eight subjects, twenty acknowledged having some biases towards Southerners. While this measure may not be completely accurate because of unreported biases, it does imply that most of the subjects considered Southerners as an outgroup.

The ratings from the first impressions questionnaire showed

that overall the stimulus person was perceived as polite, friendly, liked by teachers, hard-working, relaxed, sincere, and athletic, but also somewhat naive, cautious, and conservative. There were no significant differences between the means of the individual and group conditions on any items. However, differences did approach significance on several items: the groups judged the stimulus person to be less intelligent ($t = 1.66$), more nervous ($t = 1.46$), passive ($t = 1.3$), conservative ($t = 1.27$), naive ($t = 1.13$), and cautious ($t = 1.07$).

The major source of data was the taped recordings of the subjects' statements about the stimulus person. The tapes were transcribed and divided into speech units - a speech unit being any single statement or assertion made by a subject about the stimulus person. Two scorers were selected who were unfamiliar with the hypothesis of the experiment. Each was given the script of the videotape, the subjects' tapes, and the transcriptions with the numbered speech units. They listened to the tapes while reading the transcripts and on data sheets rated each speech unit on a +2 to -2 scale where +2 indicated a very positive statement and -2 a very negative statement. The correlation between the two sets of ratings was very high ($r = .98$). The ratings were then averaged. It was found, first, that the speech units from the group condition received significantly lower mean ratings ($t = 2.28$, $p < .020$) than those from the individual condition. The data also showed that the group condition contained a significantly higher mean percentage

of negative statements (39% vs. 26%, $t = 2.54$, $p < .015$).

6. Implications and conclusions

The data from the tapes support the hypothesis that more hostility will be expressed toward a member of an outgroup by groups than by individuals. The lack of any significant differences between the two conditions on the ratings may indicate that subjects felt some pressure to give socially desirable responses when committing themselves on paper. Many subjects kept reminding themselves to be fair and unbiased in making the ratings. However, their restraint did not extend to verbal expression. Thus although more hostility appeared in what subjects actually said in the group condition, this greater hostility did not completely carry over to the ratings. Perhaps a larger group that spent more time interacting would show a clearer effect in this regard.

It is remarkable that in a group as small as two the tendency toward increased derrogation of an outgroup member appears. The critical mechanisms producing this effect seemed to be the subject's in dyads tendency to establish solidarity with each other and to raise their own esteem by joining in a denigration of the stranger from the South. There is no reason to think that these elemental tendencies are not present in all groups. If so, they merit further attention and investigation.

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